Rubric Guidance

Programs can support more consistent and equitable review practices by:

- Using structured rubrics
- Applying evaluation criteria consistently
- Conducting reviewer calibration sessions
- Utilizing multiple reviewers
- Avoiding overreliance on any single metric
- Focusing evaluations on evidence-based criteria

Rubric Development & Structure

Can there be different "layers" to the rubric?

Yes. Programs may use a multi-stage review process. For example:

- An initial screening form to verify minimum requirements
- A secondary holistic review rubric for full application evaluation
- An interview rubric for applicants invited to interview

This layered approach can improve efficiency while maintaining holistic review principles.

Rubric Scoring & Decision Making

Can some criteria be weighted more heavily than others?

Yes. Programs may weight criteria differently based on program priorities. For ease of use, it is recommended to:

- Keep scoring scales consistent across rubric categories
- Apply weighting through formulas used to calculate overall scores

What scale should we use?

Programs may choose from several common scoring approaches:

- **Dichotomous (0/1):** Best for minimum requirement checks; high inter-rater reliability
- **High / Medium / Low:** Useful for preliminary review stages, though "medium" may be interpreted inconsistently
- **Quartile Scale (1–4):** Supports moderate differentiation and holistic review
- **Likert Scale (1–5):** Allows more nuanced evaluation across competencies but requires reviewer training and calibration

Bonus points (e.g., 0.5 increments) can also be built into Slate formulas for automatic score calculations and reporting.

Can we use score cutoffs?

Yes. Programs may establish cutoff thresholds or benchmarks as part of the review process. However, applications near a cutoff should still receive some level of secondary review to avoid unintentionally excluding applicants with strong potential who may have had unequal access to opportunities or resources.

Can programs admit applicants with lower rubric scores?

Yes. Rubrics are intended to support consistent, transparent evaluation, not replace faculty judgment or require strict rank-order admissions.

Programs may recommend applicants with lower overall scores when there are compelling strengths, such as:

- Exceptional research alignment
- Unique expertise or experiences
- Strong fit with a faculty mentor or lab

From a risk-management perspective, the key is to:

- Define evaluation criteria in advance
- Apply criteria consistently and in good faith
- Clearly document the rationale for decisions, especially when departing from overall rankings

Reviewer Roles & Calibration:

Can GPAs, trained administrative staff, or graduate students help in the review process?

Yes, with appropriate oversight.

Examples include:

- GPAs or administrative staff conducting eligibility screening
- Staff participating as one of multiple reviewers
- Graduate students serving as supplemental reviewers

Initial screening may include:

- Verifying minimum requirements or materials

- Identifying applicants whose interests are clearly misaligned with the program
- Reviewing applications that do not meet published eligibility criteria

However:

- Faculty should remain meaningfully involved in admissions decisions
- Student reviewers should not serve as the sole reviewer
- Faculty should participate in interview and final admission recommendations

Programs should also clearly communicate minimum eligibility requirements on their website and in application materials.

What are best practices for calibration or norming sessions?

Reviewer orientation and calibration are strongly recommended prior to each admissions cycle to promote shared understanding of rubric criteria and scoring expectations.

Best practices include:

- Reviewing sample applications together
- Discussing interpretation of rubric criteria
- Comparing scoring patterns across reviewers
- Identifying areas of scoring inconsistency

Programs may then clarify rubric language, refining scoring guidance, or provide additional reviewer training.

The goal is to improve consistency across reviewers, not eliminate faculty judgment.

How many reviewers should evaluate each application?

At least two reviewers per application is considered best practice, one being faculty.

Application Review Procedures

What should we do if reviewers strongly disagree about an applicant?

Admissions committees should review applications holistically and discuss differing perspectives to reach consensus.

Programs should:

- Use the rubric as a shared discussion framework
- Consider an additional reviewer when needed
- Document the final decision and rationale

Should reviewers provide written comments for every applicant?

Brief written comments are strongly encouraged, particularly when:

- Recommending applicants for interview or denial
- Supporting decisions that differ from rubric rankings
- Documenting exceptional strengths or concerns

Comments should:

- Remain professional and objective
- Reference rubric criteria or application materials
- Avoid speculation, unsupported assumptions, references to protected characteristics, and vague statements

For example, comments such as “not a good fit” should include program-related rationale tied to documented evaluation criteria.

Can we decline to review applicants who selected a faculty member not accepting students?

Programs should maintain an updated list of faculty accepting students and provide updates to Patty Stanfield for Slate configuration.

Ideally, applications should prevent selection of unavailable faculty.

If a faculty member becomes unavailable after applications are submitted, programs should:

- Review affected applications
- Notify applicants promptly
- Ask whether applicants wish to be considered by other faculty or a different department
- Update application routing and records accordingly

Programs may also consult Graduate School staff regarding deferment options when appropriate.

Interviews

Should interviews also use a rubric?

Yes. Interview evaluations should use a structured rubric or scoring guide.

Programs may:

- Extend the original application rubric

- Create a separate interview-specific rubric (e.g., for MMI or traditional interviews)

Using standardized core interview questions is best practice, and using specified scoring criteria helps promote fairness and consistency across interviewers and applicants.

Direct-Admit Guidance:

We have a decentralized system where a single faculty member selects students based on research fit. What should we do?

Direct-admit programs should incorporate structured evaluation of research fit within the rubric rather than relying solely on informal decision-making.

Programs are encouraged to:

- Include a rubric category related to faculty/lab fit or research alignment
- Allow that category to carry meaningful weight
- Clearly communicate that faculty input is a core evaluative component

Relevant criteria may include research alignment, technical or methodological expertise, relevant experiences, competencies, and potential for success within a specific lab environment.

Programs should define "fit" using clearly identifiable, program-related criteria rather than general impressions or personal preference.

It is appropriate for:

- Faculty to advocate for applicants who are especially strong matches for their lab
- Applicants to be selected even if they do not have the highest overall score

Programs should ensure that fit assessments are tied to documented rubric criteria and supported by written rationale.

Examples of appropriate documentation include:

- "Exceptional alignment with current lab methodologies and ongoing research projects"
- "Strong technical experience directly relevant to funded grant priorities"
- "Demonstrated research interests and prior experience strongly aligned with faculty expertise"

This approach supports holistic review while improving transparency and defensibility in admissions decisions.